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LAY PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNING BODIES
OF POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS:
AN A.C.T. CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in Australia in structures which allow community participation in the governance of schools. The introduction of a new Education Authority in the Australian Capital Territory, beginning in 1974, brought with it a substantial commitment to such structures as school boards, a relatively new phenomenon in Australian school systems.

However, there has been substantial experience of lay or community participation in governing bodies of post-secondary institutions in Australia. This study examines both the general experience of lay participation in such governing bodies and the specific experience of lay members of the governing bodies of three institutions in the Australian Capital Territory, the Australian National University, the Canberra College of Advanced Education and the Canberra College of Technical and Further Education.

The principal collection of data was from structured interviews with lay or community members of the councils of these three institutions, designed to produce a picture of their attitudes towards participation in governance. It was found that lay members are most commonly "middle-aged, middle-class, males", although women are more frequently found in college councils. Lay members believe that they are chosen because of their successful backgrounds, their administrative skills, and their ability to reflect general community values. They do not believe they are constrained in their participation by specific community interests. They act as independent critical, individuals.

Some areas of difficulty were identified, particularly the problem of finding sufficient time to learn thoroughly the nature of complex institutions, and to participate on an equal footing with staff members of councils.

It is asserted that the assumptions underlying lay participation remain broadly unquestioned, even at a time of significant change in the wide process of planning and control of post-secondary education. The relevance of this to the innovations in the A.C.T. school system is suggested.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>	
CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	1
	AN OUTLINE OF THE STUDY	
	A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY	
CHAPTER 2	AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY COUNCILS	8
	(a) THE BACKGROUND	
	(b) UNIVERSITY COUNCILS IN 1977	
CHAPTER 3	THE COUNCILS OF COLLEGES OF ADVANCED EDUCATION	25
CHAPTER 4	COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN T.A.F.E. IN AUSTRALIA	34
CHAPTER 5	THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY AND ITS COUNCIL	38
CHAPTER 6	THE CANBERRA C.A.E. AND ITS COUNCIL	48
CHAPTER 7	THE CANBERRA COLLEGE OF TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION AND ITS COUNCIL	56
CHAPTER 8	INTERVIEWS WITH COUNCIL MEMBERS - METHODOLOGY	64
CHAPTER 9	INTERVIEWS WITH COUNCIL MEMBERS - RESULTS	66
	(a) GENERAL	
	(b) THE LAY GROUP ON COUNCILS	
	(c) THE LAY MEMBERS OF THE A.N.U. COUNCIL	
	(d) THE LAY MEMBERS OF THE C.C.A.E. COUNCIL	
	(e) THE LAY MEMBERS OF THE C.C.T.A.F.E. COUNCIL	
CHAPTER 10	CONCLUSIONS	88
APPENDIX I	UNIVERSITY COUNCILS IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES	
APPENDIX II	LETTER AND ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL SENT TO SUBJECTS FOR INTERVIEW	